

A Lasting Achievement

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure that most of you have prepared and have on file somewhere a Last Will and Testament. It's a good and responsible thing to have because it helps ensure that when you are gone, your wealth, your assets, and all the various family heirlooms you own will end up in the hands of those you intend. Without a will spelling out your wishes, these decisions are left up to the state, and also very often to heirs who usually have conflicting ideas about who should inherit what. You likely know families that have been thrown into turmoil – brothers, sisters, sometimes grandchildren – becoming bitter enemies because someone died without a will, or because there was a will, but it was incomplete, out of date, or thought (at least by some) to be unfair.

So, like I said, a current will is a good thing to have. Of course, it's less important when you're young, relatively unattached, and haven't yet accumulated much in the way of worldly wealth; but there comes a point in life, once you've begun to acquire property and other assets, and "significant others" – a spouse, children, and so on, when you begin to think about how you want your estate distributed in the event of your death. Sooner or later the old truth, "You can't take it with you" hits home, and you begin to take stock of what you will leave behind, and to whom you want to leave it.

Naturally, the more you acquire, the more important this is. A person who has successfully built up a business, taking it from nothing but an idea, and who through lots of determination, hard work, self sacrifice, and wise planning, creates a thriving, profitable enterprise, wants to ensure that their life's work will not be lost. You can't take it with you, but you want there to be some way to guarantee that those who inherit the fruit of your labor will appreciate and continue to build on it. So we might put certain stipulations in our wills to try to continue to control the result of our work even after we're gone. There are many ways to do this, but a simple example for someone with minor dependents is to decree that certain funds are to be held in trust, to be used only for education, until the heirs reach a certain age. It's an effort to ensure that the estate won't be squandered on sports cars and fancy clothes by someone too young to be fully responsible. But more than that, it's an example of how we all want to guarantee that our life's work will endure and continue to be useful.

But the sad truth is that you can't do that either. We all know of cases in which the accumulated achievements of successful entrepreneurs came to naught soon after their deaths despite their best efforts to ensure it wouldn't happen. It happens with businesses, farms, corporations, kingdoms, and even churches – those who work so hard to build something end up having to hand it over to others who eventually lose it. Sometimes it's due to the foolish mishandling of what they've been given. Other times it's due to circumstances beyond their control: like war, natural disasters, or changing conditions in the world and market that make what was once a viable enterprise (or nation) no longer so. The bottom line is that you cannot control the future or the actions of your heirs. Thus it's likely that after you're gone, maybe immediately or maybe within a couple generations, everything you've accomplished will be lost.

This is what King Solomon is lamenting in today's Old Testament lesson from his book of Ecclesiastes. It's a record of Solomon's quest to find the meaning and purpose of life. As you read through it, you discover that as wise as he is, the answer always eludes him. He says as much in the opening lines: "Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities. All is

vanity ...” Sometimes the same phrase is translated with the word *meaningless* or *emptiness* instead of *vanity*. The Hebrew word that Solomon uses there actually means “breath” or “vapor”. The idea is that in this life there is nothing to hold on to, nothing that really lasts ... everything you try to capture eventually slips away between your fingers. It’s like trying to catch the wind.

And as Solomon pursues the question of the meaning of life, he goes from one possibility to the next. “Maybe life is about enjoying pleasures”, he thinks, “or maybe it’s about attaining wisdom, or acquiring wealth, or power, or fame.” So he tries them in succession, throwing himself body and soul into each possibility. With each attempt he comes up short of the answer he’s looking for. Pleasures grow tiresome. With time every novelty wears off. Wisdom has its limits. No matter how smart and educated you are, there’s no way to avoid ending up in the same place as all the fools: six feet under. Wealth also has its allurements. But they don’t last. In the end it too fails to bring the happiness it promises. So it goes with everything. Nothing Solomon tries brings him the lasting peace and satisfaction he seeks. That’s why he comes to the conclusion that all things “under the sun” are ultimately futile and meaningless.

In the section we heard read, Solomon wrote of trying to find the meaning of life in work and human achievement. “Maybe”, he thought, “our lives are about what we accomplish”. So he set out to do great things. And though we’ve already heard his final judgment about this possibility – that it’s not the answer – it’s worth noting that we live in a culture, indeed, most of us have assimilated the values of this culture, which holds that what you do with your life, what you achieve, is the measure of your human worth.

To be sure, we usually define ourselves by what we do. We say, “I am a farmer, a cattleman, a carpenter, a teacher, a parent, whatever.” What we are saying is: “I am what I do.” And we all know people who are almost entirely consumed in their work. To some degree, it’s safe to say all of us are. When we are young, the question we ask ourselves is, “Will I be a success?” And then we spend the rest of our lives evaluating our progress, specifically measuring it by the standards of our chosen fields of work. A businessman measures it by the amount of money he makes. It’s not necessarily that he’s greedy or materialistic; it’s how he keeps score. It’s how he determines, “Am I successful?” In a pastor’s line of work, it’s often measured by how big is the church, how many new members come in, and what percentage of the congregation shows up on a Sunday morning. Other fields have their own standards of measuring “success”. And it’s interesting to me that in our culture, being “good at what you do” is more important than just about any other quality. These days it is not uncommon to hear people say of even the highest office holders, “I don’t care what kind of morally bankrupt man he is, he’s doing a good job.”

Today we hear Solomon say, “So what? So what if I break my back sweating and working to accomplish great things? So what if I change the world with my wisdom and skill? It won’t help me; I’ll be gone. The fruits of my labors are going to fall into the hands of people who do not appreciate them because they haven’t had to do the work. Consequently nothing I’ve done will last.” Thus Solomon comes to the point where he says he hates his work. The daily grind of trying to get ahead becomes drudgery to him because he realizes it’s all ultimately in vain. And I want to stress here that it’s not that there’s anything wrong with working and doing a good job – that’s a good thing, just as wisdom, and pleasure, and fame and fortune are good things. The mistake is trying to find the meaning and purpose of life in such things, because none of them will last.

Well, perhaps it was prophetic insight, or perhaps it was because he knew his son's character pretty well, but it turns out that Solomon's assessment of the situation was spot on. The kingdom Solomon inherited from his father, David, was war weary, economically depressed, and fairly unstable. But when Solomon took the reins, he poured his heart and soul into making the nation flourish. Wealth streamed in, magnificent civil projects were built to include many palaces and, most notably, the spectacular Temple of God in Jerusalem. The glory of the nation of Israel became the envy of the world. No king of Israel accomplished more than Solomon. But less than a week after his death, his foolhardy son threw most of it away and plunged the nation into civil war. Israel never recovered a fraction of the splendor it achieved under Solomon. Everything this great and wise man accomplished was lost – except, of course, that portion of his writings which were inspired by the Holy Spirit and are preserved for us in God's Word. As the Scriptures say, "Heaven and Earth will pass away, but the Word of the Lord endures forever."

As I thought about this, it occurred to me that even the achievements of God are doomed to pass away. When Solomon writes of pouring his knowledge and skill into his work, only to hand it over to fools who would lose it ... well, it sounds like something God could say of his work of creation. What greater or more glorious work has ever been done than the creation of the physical universe? What infinite wisdom and skill went into that work? And what greater fools than we have ever received – and lost – so great an inheritance? If Solomon found his work to be a letdown, imagine how God felt about losing his. But because of our sin, both the sin of our first parents and our own individual guilt, everything God has created, every work of God that you see all around you, is going to pass away. It's no wonder that no human achievement can last. How can it when even everything God has done will be lost too?

Except one thing. There is one achievement that will last forever. And because there is only one thing that will last, if we are looking for the enduring meaning and purpose of life, then our only hope of finding it is in that one achievement that will last forever.

What is it? Strangely enough, even though it's our sin that caused everything to be undone, it is the *task of the sinner* that will endure for all eternity. How's that? We read in the text, "To the one who pleases him, God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to *the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give it to the one who pleases God.*" There it is: the sinner's job is to toil in pain and grief, and to find no rest in his anxious struggle, to work until he drops, and then hand over all he has earned to those who please God. I refer, of course, to the work Jesus Christ accomplished when he suffered the consequences of our sin upon the cross. As the Scriptures say, "He who knew no sin became sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." His work upon the cross as *the Sinner*, his death, burial, and resurrection for us, is the only achievement that has ever been done that will last forever. It is the one accomplishment that bridges the gap between time and eternity. Though the whole work of creation will pass away, the work of Christ on the cross will remain, and upon it the new creation will be founded.

That's why if we are looking for meaning and purpose in life, the only place to look for it is on the cross. And what we will find there is a treasure greater than anything we could have imagined. We will find that our lives are really all about God's great love for us as so clearly displayed in the price he paid to redeem us. We will find too that our lives, the lives that will endure forever, are something we inherit because of the Lord Jesus' Last Will and Testament. He gave up his life for us, so that the life we live now is his – the one he gave us when he died. It is the life he continues to give us in his Word that endures forever, and in the Sacrament of his

Last Testament in which he gives us the fruit of his labor: the body broken and the blood shed to cleanse us from sin.

When we have this understanding of the purpose and meaning of life, everything else falls into perspective. God's good gifts of work, and wisdom, and pleasure, and wealth, and family relationships, and friends, and whatever else we pursue can be enjoyed precisely because they are not our reason for existence. They are gifts God gives us because he loves us in Christ. That's our foundation. What's more, because the work of Christ on the cross will endure forever, anything we build upon that achievement will also last. Our work done in Christ Jesus, the lives we help bring to him, the wisdom we learn in him, the love we share because of him – all these things will also last forever.

So let's make it our goal to build on this lasting achievement, so that, as St. Paul says, we "set our hearts on things above, and not on earthly things". Let's invest in the things that will last, and not the things that are doomed to pass away; so that when Christ, who is our life appears, we will also appear with him in glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!